Big issues

Small Islands

Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States

Bridgetown, Barbados
25 April - 6 May 1994

UNITED NATIONS

EARTH SUMMIT

Big issues

Island "paradises" worldwide—under increasing stress from a host of ills associated with economic growth—will soon be at the centre of the international stage, as the United Nations prepares for the first Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, to be held in Bridgetown, Barbados, from 25 April to 6 May 1994.

There was a time when islands were self-sustaining. Now once-lush islands are being deforested and eroded, some threatened with inundation by rising sea levels. Coral reefs once brimming with life are bleached and damaged. Natural disasters have wreaked havoc on island societies. Island peoples, who for centuries lived in harmony with nature, today struggle to find their place in the global economy.

The Barbados Conference will recommend action at the national, regional and international levels in a number of key areas, including:

climate change and sea-level rise

Many small islands will be severely affected—some may disappear—by the rise in sea levels expected to result from global warming, mostly caused by emissions of greenhouse gases in industrialized countries.

human resource development

The size and vulnerability of small islands call for special attention to issues such as education, training and health to ensure effective use of limited resources.

natural disasters

Small islands are highly vulnerable to natural disasters such as tropical storms, which have wiped out entire crops. Recovering from such disasters can retard development by years.

waste management

Many small islands lack adequate sewage treatment and waste disposal facilities. Some are also affected by the dumping of toxic and other waste material.

coastal and marine resources

Improved management is needed for coastal and marine ecosystems, which are threatened by overfishing, pollution and unsustainable tourism development. This would have global as well as local benefits, since small island countries are custodians of some 30 million sq km of ocean—one sixth of the Earth's surface—that falls within their 200-mile offshore exclusive economic zones.

freshwater resources

Increasing population pressures and consumption are further depleting supplies of freshwater resources. Water supplies are also at risk from natural catastrophes, pollution and salt-water intrusion.

land use

Development places heavy demands on scarce land resources in island countries. Deforestation and erosion are widespread, affecting both inland and coastal ecosystems.

energy

Sustainable development is impeded by heavy dependence on fossil fuels imported at great expense. Renewable energy resources and energy-efficient technologies need to be rigorously explored.

tourism development

Tourism is a major income source for most small islands, but better management is needed to prevent damage to ecosystems and the undermining of island cultures.

biodiversity

Valuable species that inhabit small islands and their seas—including many unique to those habitats—are being displaced, depleted and endangered by development.

transport and communication

The remoteness of island societies forced them to be sustainable for centuries, but the emergence of a global economy and dependence on foreign markets highlight the need to improve transport and communication links, especially on a regional basis.

The voyage to Barbados

The Programme of Action to be adopted at the Conference will propose solutions to these problems. Negotiations on a draft Programme began at the first session of the Preparatory Committee for the Global Conference, held in New York from 30 August to 10 September 1993. Discussions drew on the work of two regional technical meetings: one for the Indian and Pacific Ocean region, held in Vanuatu in June 1993, and one for the Atlantic, Caribbean and Mediterranean regions, held in Trinidad and Tobago in July 1993. To complete negotiations, a resumed session of the Preparatory Committee is planned for 7-11 March 1994 in New York.

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*Member States of the United Nations and its specialized agencies and associate members of the Regional Commissions

earth summit **commitments sought**

The Global Conference was called for at the Earth Summit—the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development—in Brazil in June 1992. Its goal is to put together strategies and measures to enhance the sustainable development of small island developing States, based on Agenda 21, the comprehensive global plan of action adopted at the Earth Summit. At the Summit, small islands were designated as a vulnerable group warranting special international attention.

The Barbados Conference will be an early test of the global partnership formed at the Earth Summit, at which rich and poor countries agreed to act together to pursue sustainable development—that is, development that meets present needs without jeopardizing the welfare of future generations by undermining the environment on which all life depends. If this new partnership can address effectively the problems of small islands, there will be greater confidence that other global challenges can successfully be met.

Non-governmental participation

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have an important role to play. Over 150 NGOs are expected to participate as observers in the Conference and its preparatory meetings. Among these are many community island groups, as well as regional and international organizations.

At the time of the Global Conference, a number of parallel events will be held, including an **NGO Forum**, featuring lectures and workshops, and a **Village of Hope**, portraying island themes. The organizers can be contacted at the Caribbean Conservation Association, Savannah Lodge, The Garrison, St. Michael, Barbados, West Indies.
Tel: (809) 426-5373, Fax: (809) 429-8483

SUSTECH '94, an exhibit showcasing sustainable technologies with particular applicability to small islands, is being organized by the Barbados Manufacturers' Association, Building 1, Pelican Industrial Park, St. Michael, Barbados.
Tel: (809) 426-4474, Fax: (809) 436-5182

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